



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,  
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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## AN OBJECT-LESSON FOR TEACHERS.

BY MRS. DOWSON.

THERE is a little book lying upon my table, which contains lessons for infants concerning the deepest truths known to man. Ever since it was given to me it has remained in my mind as an example of the way in which learning may be used to produce simplicity of statement, combined with a penetration into the heart of the matter unattainable by any other ordinary means.

I have day-dreams of what might come about if such teaching were general, and if the learning at the back of it were at least never missed for lack of due teaching of the teacher. The day-dreams are not likely to be soon fulfilled, for there are walls of obstruction in the way; but I am writing this object-lesson as a poor little contribution-drop to the stream which is gradually undermining the foundations of those walls.

A lesson for teachers need not be either a teaching lesson or a lesson in teaching—I should not presume to meddle with such technical work—it may be a lesson in thinking, a lesson given from a position outside the professional and technical sphere, and suggesting openings for reflection, weak spots in knowledge, sources of light into dark places of the mind, fresh material for use by parent and teacher lying ready to the hand but perhaps hidden from the eye. To give an object-lesson of this kind is my aim; and indeed no other kind fit for teachers lies within the compass of space at my command, or within the scope of my power and place.

Our object shall be the every-day and apparently uninteresting *Flat-iron*. I will take the lesson of the usual kind, the lesson embodying what is called the plain man's view of the flat-iron, as my starting point. The plain man says the iron is solid, heavy, bright and so on; he describes it as a "real" thing possessing in its own right certain qualities—the flat-iron *is* so-and-so, he says, whatever other things may



be; it stands on the table, certainly it does, but it is not particularly related to anything else, except sometimes to the fire, and somebody's hand, and his collars, he supposes. Yes, it *is* this or that, and is used for the other—and, of course, it is a real, solid thing—no mistake on that score can possibly be made. Looked at critically there are obvious faults in this description: to begin with, it is manifestly quite uncritically put together; much of it is taken for granted and derived from the character of language and the way of picturing things habitual among other unreflecting people; it is incoherent and inadequate; it does not stand thinking out and thinking over. Let us turn, then, to the man who has reflected about it, to the man of science—that is, of systematised knowledge—and see what he has to say of our flat-iron. Long ago he has taken himself to task concerning the words used naïvely by the other man, and has asked himself what he means by them and how far such a picture of the flat-iron can possibly be true if the world is a rational world without higgledy-pigglediness or inconsistency. He is in a position to criticise. "If your flat-iron were at the bottom of a mine it would weigh less than it does here," he says, "if it were at the Equator it would weigh more than at the Poles; somewhere between us and the moon it would weigh nothing at all and would float in a vacuum; what do you mean by saying that it *is* heavy? The iron seems heavy when the earth pulls it, and as the earth pulls it, and when and as it pulls the earth; it seems bright when and as the light is reflected from it; by itself and of itself it has none of these qualities you speak about; it *seems* to you as if it had, it *really is* something quite different from what it seems." He goes on to tell us what it "really is." The substance which looks solid, all of a piece, and quite at rest, is, he says, made up of an enormous number of tiny "atoms," each so small as to be invisible under a far more powerful microscope than we can ever hope to construct, and all in rapid movement. They are embedded in a remarkable kind of substance called *ether*, which is not matter like the atoms of iron—not a material substance at all—nor in the least like any kind of matter in its structure, although in its behaviour it is somewhat like all kinds of matter combined, except that it can do certain things quite out of their reach. This ether-substance is

not made up of atoms, as all matter is, but is a continuous, gaseous, it "really is" all of a piece like a solid and more rigid than a solid, because it is rigid and has no vibrations the light travels through it more or less as it does through a solid but of something different in its vibrations. Because it is so much more than a thousand times more than any crown glass. Because it is so much more than the stars, and all the heavenly bodies, and all the heavenly bodies, because its fluidity is not the fluidity of water, however tenuous and refined, but it is the fluidity of worlds and suns has not any hindrance from the ether. It has been moving for uncounted millions of years. In this all-pervading substance the flat-iron dance, says the scientist, is a dance; more vigorously when it is cold, furiously when it is hot, more furiously—and parted from the ether as gas, as in the atmosphere. The scientific man says that the flat-iron man speaks are appearances, not realities. The flat-iron is intangible, material flat-iron is intangible, imperceptible "a substance which links the ether-substance which links the ether-substance with which the flat-iron's ether "bound-ether" is a "bound-ether" in which all bodies are bound up. Properties from this association are the properties of the ether-substance. This is true, says the scientist, he has been able to show that all bodies, even the flat-iron have, even the ether sea, and also to show that they are bound up; these in relation to all the matter-world universal sea.



not made up of atoms, as all matter is, whether solid, fluid or gaseous, it "really is" all of a piece; and it is both inert and rigid like a solid and more fluid than the lightest gas. Because it is rigid and has *inertia* it is able to transmit to us in its vibrations the light that left a star a thousand years ago or more; because its rigidity and *inertia* are not those of a solid but of something different, it brings that light some sixty thousand times more quickly than it could travel through crown glass. Because it is a fluid it allows the sun, the stars, and all the heavenly bodies to rush through it; because its fluidity is not that of any material substance, however tenuous and refined, the speed of those rushing worlds and suns has not abated in the least degree through any hindrance from the ethereal ocean in which they have been moving for uncounted millions of earthly years.

In this all-pervading substance the matter-atoms of the flat-iron dance, says the scientific man, their never-ending dance; more vigorously when the iron is hot, less vigorously when it is cold, furiously when the metal flows in a furnace, more furiously—and parted far one from another—where the iron is gas, as in the atmosphere of the sun.

The scientific man says that the qualities of which the plain man speaks are appearances, and that the *real* visible, tangible, material flat-iron is made up of the invisible, intangible, imperceptible "atoms" of iron-matter, and of the invisible, intangible, imperceptible, and immaterial ether-substance which links them together and transmits all modes of energy with which the iron has to do. He calls the flat-iron's ether "*bound-ether*" to distinguish it from the "*free-ether*" in which all bodies move. The bound-ether within a particular body acquires, he says, some different properties from this association, and is indeed body of that body—its own possession stamped with a character wanting to the rest. This is true, says our physicist, of all kinds of bodies he has been able to examine, and probably it is true of all bodies, even of his own and ours. We and the flat-iron have, he thinks, ether-bodies related to the free-ether sea, and also to the matter-bodies with which they are bound up; these in their turn having their own relation to all the matter-world through the medium of that universal sea.



If we ask what the matter-atoms of the iron “really are” he will tell us that he does not know : he is sure they are not minute pellets like shot, little perfectly hard bits of iron as we perceive it in the lump ; and he does not think they are mere “points of force,” as Boscovitch suggested. If we press him he may say that Lord Kelvin’s theory is perhaps the most reasonable and likely, and that according to this the atoms of all matter are portions of the immaterial ether whirling in vortex-motion, and vibrating or crimping in themselves each after the special pattern of its kind. Material substances, if this is true, “are really” the immaterial ether manifesting itself to our senses in different ways when divided into whirling portions which are associated together in a bound-ether body : matter is a *mode* of something that is not matter. So indeed are light and electricity, says our scientific man ; they are ether behaving in other fashions than the material one, and we may sum up this scientific view of the world of things in the words used by Professor Lodge at the London Institution :—“I have now endeavoured to introduce you to the simplest conception of the material universe which has yet occurred to man—the conception, that is, of one universal substance . . . . extending to the furthest limits of space of which we have any knowledge . . . . One continuous substance filling all space ; which can vibrate as light ; which can be sheared into positive and negative electricity ; which in whirls constitutes matter ; and which transmits by continuity and not by impact, every action and reaction of which matter is capable.”

We are borne on our flat-iron into the greater world—the fairy-land—of physics; and in that fairy-land we find a strong desire in part at least fulfilled, for the Many are gathered into One, all scattered things of the material world are brought into a unity of which they are related parts. In this respect our scientific picture is incomparably superior to that of the uncritical plain man who portrays an assemblage of “loose and separate” unrelated things. The world that “really is” for one is for the other not the world that really is but only the world that seems; are we, then, altogether to deny reality to this seeming world of tables and flat-irons and hands and collars and the like and give it over to the world of unseen “atoms” and immaterial materiality?



Is there no opening for criticism here? We are driven to ask what it means for anything to *be*; what is *reality*; what it is to know and how we can know that we know truly what we know. Quite necessarily, quite inevitably, we must turn to the philosopher, that is, unless we are content to remain in a maze and a muddle; for, great and grand as are the achievements of science, there is to its operation a limit where all scientific men stop short and cease to criticise, to observe, and to compare according to the scientific method, because at this limit the scientific method becomes both inappropriate and impossible. There remain, therefore, incoherence, inadequacy and contradiction in the pictured world of science; there are untested assumptions about the foundations, and metaphysical quasi-entities throughout the superstructure, of the scientific scheme. The real world of science is still not real enough to satisfy the mind of man. Out of its fairy-land the philosopher must carry us into the vast cathedral where Hegel and Spinoza and many more have thrown their torchlight beams along interminable aisles. In those imperfectly illuminated depths *man* stands out as the problem of problems and the key to all beside; although with man in his fulness, in the richness of a personal self-conscious life, physical science has quite rightly no concern. The subject-matter of scientific research is in the last resort nothing but changes in the mental state experienced by a man, and its method must be the method of a man for ever under personal conditions; but the examination of the secret of personality and of all knowledge and existence must be conducted by philosophy.

There are degrees in reality; the more coherent is the world to which we penetrate in thought and act, the more profound, the more widely inclusive is that world, and the more of reality have we taken to ourselves. The plain man's world is not illusively unreal, it is only not real enough; the scientific man's world has ragged edges to its magnificence, but neither is it unreal,—its reality overpasses and includes the real world of sense.

Into the still greater world beyond, our flat-iron must not now conduct us; we must turn away and seek rather to gather up the suggestions we have met with in its company thus far.



The world of sense, in which it plays its part, has come to be for us a world within a world; the wilderness of stars, the earth and all its earthly marvels, our own most marvellous earthly bodies, all are compact of bubbles blown in an invisible and illimitable sea. The bubbles do not burst—they are bubbles blown by an all-sustaining Breath—but the large world in which they move, although it does not touch our sense, is as much *our* world as is the world they make, for out of it they come, and in it are we ourselves by those bodies of ours which are no less “real,” and indeed it may well be, far more real and more enduringly our own, than those we touch and see.

## WHEN I WAS A

BY MRS. FRED.

As far back—beyond the gold  
 morning of my childhood—lies the  
 How small was the distance o  
 earth! How large, too, all thing  
 vanishing mist! Strange faces a  
 out of it; smiled or frowned up  
 obliterated as suddenly as they h  
 greatly heed them: they had no  
 though there were times when  
 shadowy beings became more  
 harmed circle, they would actual  
 thoughtful, those big people to  
 special, a grown-up cousin (age  
 in conjunction with a dark g  
 the exciting and “cold-shivery  
 But they never stayed long, th  
 sooner or later, for some tiresom  
 let us. Poor things! we were so  
 you really hot and rumpled up w  
 We never missed them lon  
 at those days—the opening of  
 long-lost toy, a whole penny to  
 and behold the world was at our  
 I pity, from my heart, any c  
 it is not only that his baby-ea  
 nature's lullaby; not only tha  
 ordered ways of man's makin  
 old of God's planting; not o  
 over the sweet fellowship of th  
 our sisters, the birds; and that  
 lower-world can never be his;  
 the childhood, as it were, of  
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